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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HAVANA 001001

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SUBJECT: FIRST ROUND OF CUBAN ELECTIONS: "IT'S THE PROCESS,
STUPID"

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The first round of elections in Cuba covering only municipalities proceeded uneventfully as expected on October 21. A leading dissident, Guillermo Farinas, was detained in Villa Clara when he attempted to vote (to vote NO in his case). Two election observers, one Czech and the other Slovak were detained and then deported last night. Their ambassadors were informed after the fact. A second round (if needed) for the municipal elections will be held Sunday, October 28. Elections for the National Assembly, which should be held simultaneously with municipal elections, have not yet been scheduled. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) The quiet Sunday dawn in Havana was shattered yesterday when aircraft flew low passes over the city several times. As aircraft of any kind are never/never seen or heard over Havana, this display may have been designed to get sleepy voters out of bed and off to the polls early. In most countries in the hemisphere there would be no mistaking the final days of an election as every vertical surface would be plastered with posters, and vehicles with loudspeakers playing patriotic music and repeating campaign slogans would be all over the streets. Not in Cuba. If one were not reminded at the last minute it would be easy to forget that there was an election. In this particular case the election was round one of municipal elections that will put upwards of 15,000 people in "elected" municipal office throughout the island. A second round (if needed) for the municipal elections will take place on Sunday, October 28. Unlike elections for the National Assembly, ostensibly Cuba's ruling institution, in the case of the municipal elections there was actually more than one candidate for the positions. Candidates had been selected by a show of hands in neighborhood meetings earlier in the month. But there was no campaigning, nor any indication of where a candidate might stand on municipal issues, arguably the most directly important to voters throughout the world.

¶3. (C) This lack of interest in the election results was, of course, by design. As Fidel Castro himself pointed out in one of his "Reflections" columns in the Communist Party daily Granma on October 20, "Cuban elections are the antithesis of those that take place in the U.S." As Castro noted, here there are no expensive campaigns that favor rich candidates or those in the pay of special interests. In Cuba, elections are peaceful, orderly, and have an excellent turnout (well over 90 percent according to the Cuban press). The regime's

position is: "Who needs to know where the candidates stand or what they will do when elected? As long as there is an orderly voting process, true democracy is served." Cuban state TV announcers made breathless commentaries from polling places throughout the country about how well the process had gone as viewers watched voters drop ballots into boxes guarded by two uniformed school children who saluted each vote. However, in almost an hour of post-election coverage there was not one mention of who had been elected, what issues were being placed before the people, or what the election might say about the future of Cuba. Man on the street interviews echoed Castro's words as one after another "random" interviewee declared the Cuban system the best in the world because there was no need for messy campaigns and voting is quick and easy. It's hard to agonize over a vote when there is only one candidate, or just a series of names without platforms or other identification.

¶4. (C) As far as we could tell from visits around Havana, while voters may have turned out as reported in the press (the same uniformed school kids will visit your house if you don't show up to vote by mid-afternoon and ask what the problem is), they were inspired much more by the return of beautiful sunny weather after several days of rain than they were by the elections. Many of our dissident contacts--who obviously have especially strong views on the issue--dismiss the entire process as a farce, but we have yet to meet anyone who thinks their vote truly has an impact.

¶5. (C) One dissident who thought he might have an impact by voting was Guillermo Farinas. Farinas believes that Cubans should tell the regime what they feel by voting, and voting "NO" to any of the candidates. There are actually several schools of thought among the dissidents about the elections, but most disagree with Farinas. The others argue that a "NO"

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vote is a waste of time as the regime knows that there is opposition, and that any vote that is not a positive one for a listed candidate is invalid. (NOTE: As one individual pointed out to us, if a candidate gets only one positive vote out of one hundred cast, they will win with 100 percent of the valid/valid vote). Many argue that the best way to defy the regime is not to show up to the elections at all, regardless of the pressure to do so. For most Cubans, this gesture appears not to be worth the potential risk to their jobs and whatever privileges they have. Still, the regime apparently thought Farinas, concepts were a threat to the process. He was detained on his way to the polls, his identification card was taken from him, and he was escorted home and left there under guard. When the polls closed, his identification was returned to him and he was allowed to leave.

¶6. (C) Even more curiously given how smooth the outward process went, friends of Farinas reported that two election observers, Czech Pavel Res and Slovak Ptr Novotny, both of the European Network of Electoral Monitoring, who had been at a press conference at Farinas' house in Villa Clara the night before the elections, had disappeared, and it was feared they had been detained. Dissident leader Martha Beatriz Roque called the Czech and Slovak ambassadors to inform them. Neither ambassador was aware that the two observers were in country. However, after checking with their capitals, they contacted the Cuban immigration service and were told that Cuban authorities had no knowledge of the two. Nevertheless, on October 22, Roque called to say that the two had indeed been deported overnight. Their ambassadors were informed after the fact from Europe.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The conduct of this round of municipal elections is a good bellwether of how democratic Cuba is at the moment. By and large, the meaningless elections are treated as a ho-hum affair by the average Cuban. One Cuban commented to us on Sunday afternoon on the confusion among most of his neighbors, who were expected to vote approval of

people many had never even heard of before. However, one future election may be noteworthy in the way that formal Kremlin portraits used to be. As yet, the list of candidates for the National Assembly has yet to be produced (only one candidate per seat in that election). Normally, the election of the National Assembly would take place together with the final municipal elections. Once "elected" the National Assembly meets twice a year (usually for a day each time) to approve formally all laws dictated by the Council of State. The Council of State, including the President and other senior leaders, is itself named by the Assembly together with the Council of Ministers. Many in the dissident community believe that the reason there has been no movement on electing a new National Assembly is that the regime has not yet figured out what to do about Fidel Castro, who normally would be put up as a candidate for the Assembly, which would then elect him President. Some have speculated that if, in the end, the cast of characters put up for election to the National Assembly does not differ from those of past elections in any significant way, it will be an indication that the Fidelistas, the so-called "Taliban" wing of the regime, remains dominant, and that real change will be even more distant. These analysts believe that such a result, while meaningless from an electoral standpoint, will drive many Cubans into greater despair about the future.

WILLIAMS